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# No Future for Swiss EFL Students

Jürg Strässler

## 1. Introduction

In this paper I am going to address the difficulties that Swiss secondary school pupils have with English tenses and aspects. The main focus will lie on the future forms as these seem to pose the largest problem for two reasons: First, in all Swiss German dialects there are only two tenses, the present and the present perfect. As the dialect is the mother tongue of German speaking Swiss and as it is used in nearly all everyday situations apart from education, I will not consider the form known as Standard Swiss German (Schweizerhochdeutsch, (cf. Ammon et al., 2004: xxxvii - xlii)), although the respective tense system differs slightly from Standard German.

Secondly the 10 forms used in English to express the future are either modalities (*will* + inf., *going to*, *be to*, *be about to*, etc. ) or they are present tenses used with future meaning. In English there is no actual future tense and most modern grammar books for students of English (e.g. Foley and Hall (2003), Hewings (2005), Eastwood (2006) consider the past and the present as tenses but they do not use the term 'tense' for the future. This is in contrast to other languages the students might know, such as French or Italian and as up to recent times, English had never been the first foreign language in German speaking Switzerland, their L2 might influence their command of English.

Apart from the present simple and the present continuous, which in their present meaning are often used in free variation by Swiss students, they hardly ever apply any other form when talking about a future event. Furthermore, whereas in the present there is a preference for the continuous form even for habits, in the future the students tend to use the present simple though the present continuous would be one of the correct forms or in other words, there is no future (form) for Swiss EFL students.

I will try to establish possible reasons for these inconsistencies. Are they a result of insufficient teaching (material) in the initial stages, simple transfer from L1, transfer from L2, or are they based on cognitive processes?

## 2. Methodology

The present study is based on data gathered from students with 3 to 6 years of tuition in EFL, consisting of recordings of spontaneous speech, guided writing as well as gap filling exercises.

The first group (Group A) consists of 50 students aged 15, who had reached level A2 after three years' tuition with *Snapshot* (Abbs, Baker and Fairbairn, 1997, 1998). They had been introduced to the present simple for scheduled future events (1) and the modal *can* with future meaning (1997: Unit 8), however without being told that these sentences refer to future events.

- (1) *Batman IV* starts at ten to six.
- (2) We can get another ticket at the cinema.

The going-to-future for future plans and intentions is introduced in Unit 14 (1997) with sentences such as

- (3) I'm going to wear this black top.

In Unit 6 (1998) the present continuous with future meaning is introduced, however without indicating that this construction is only possible if a future time is mentioned.

- (4) Liverpool are playing Barcelona tomorrow.

And finally the students were introduced to the will-future for predictions and decisions in Unit 13 (1998).

- (5) What a view! – I'll take a photo.

However, it is not mentioned that the will-future can only be used for spontaneous decisions and not for pre-meditated ones.

To sum up we have seen that the students of Group A have only got three forms at their disposal, the going-to-future, the will-future and the present continuous for future activities. The data consists of sentences from a general assessment test, recordings of oral production and of their written performance.

Group B consists of 47 students at the beginning of their sixth year of English, who had reached level B1 to B2. Prior to the evaluation half of the students had been taught all the future forms explicitly by means of *The Oxford Practice Grammar Intermediate* (Eastwood 2006) and the other half with *An Advanced Grammar in Use* (Hewings 2005) after they had been given an assessment test. Instead of just going from unit to unit and doing the respective exercises the students had the task to summarise the theory in form of a table. In a first step they looked at the standard forms, i.e. the ones that Group A had been introduced to, but this time based on the semantics underlying the choice of the correct form, in line with the following statement:

English does not have a 'future tense', but uses a variety of forms to talk about the future. The choice of form often depends on whether we are making a prediction, expressing an intention or talking about an arrangement. (Foley and Hall 2003: 72).

The main purpose of this task was to create awareness of the fact that every form depicts at least another shade of meaning.

It came as no surprise that especially logically minded students had no difficulty with this task and were able to give examples for each situation with the appropriate form as well as explain why a specific form is used in sentences taken from online British newspapers. Even if some sentences did not correspond to their system, they were aware that the specific forms were deliberately marked.

The result of their task is given in table 1.

	will	going-to	present continuous	present simple
future arrangements / plans <sup>1</sup>		√	√ time must be indicated	
decisions*	√ spontaneous	√ premeditated		
predictions	√ based on one's own opinion	√ based on present facts		
certainties / uncertainties	√ uncertain	√ certain		

<sup>1</sup> Intentions are either plans or decisions

future facts, details and comments (neutral future)	√			
orders and offers	√			
refusals		√ not going to ...		
future time clauses			√ (esp. with while, when)	√
main clauses depending on future time clauses or if-clauses	√			
timetables				√

Table 1: Standard future forms

In a second phase the students developed table 2 for the combined future forms. As they had previously been introduced to the continuous aspect as well as the present perfect tense, only the official and the near future were really new to them. The other forms could be derived analytically.

official future	to be to	officially planned actions
near future	to be about to	actions about to happen
future continuous	will be ___ing	- action in progress in the future - single future action in the course of events
future perfect	will have + past part.	action finished in the future
future perfect continuous	will have been ___ing	action reaching up to a future time
past future	was/were going to ..., but	intentions in the past

Table 2: Combined future forms

To test their awareness of the different future forms, the students of Group B were given 50 sentences in which they had to fill in the appropriate future form.

Group C consisted of 44 students at the end of their secondary school career, i.e. after 7 years of English, most of whom had reached level C1. They had gone through the same phases as Group A and Group B and had had no further formal instruction of the future forms. Their command of these forms was evaluated by means of recordings of oral production and of their written performance.

### 3. Data and interpretation

#### 3.1 Group A

Having entered junior college the students had to write a general assessment test in which they had to fill in appropriate verb forms, among other tasks. With respect to the future, they were given the following sentences among others.

- (6) My brother (get) \_\_\_\_\_ married this afternoon.
- (7) Do you think we (have) \_\_\_\_\_ time to go shopping this afternoon?
- (8) [In a restaurant] I (have) \_\_\_\_\_ a coke, please.

In sentence (6) most students used the present simple, though some of them opted for the will-future. None of them used the present continuous, which would have been the best solution. For sentences (7) and (8) all the 50 students used the present simple, although they had been introduced to the will-future.

Typical sentences in oral production were

- (9) He maybe go to university.
- (10) I stay at home if it rains tonight.
- (11) Perhaps I study medicine after finishing school.

and in written material sentences such as

- (12) The season is starting in September. Then I'm often having matches on Saturday.
- (13) Next year I do an exchange in Australia.
- (14) I spend my next holiday in Croatia.

It is hard to tell whether the insufficient command of the future forms is due to bad teaching (material) or whether the students see no necessity to express future time in the verb form if it is already indicated by means of an adverbial, as is the case in Swiss German. Or is it even the case that they do not have an intrinsic mental concept of the future?

### 3.2 Group B

After extensive extrinsic tuition the students of Group B were given a gap filling test consisting of 50 sentences covering the 10 different future forms, very similar to the assessment test they had written before that grammar block. For lack of space only some examples shall be given here.

- (15) She still has to write 10 pages. She (not finish) \_\_\_\_\_ her paper by midnight.
- (16) I \_\_\_\_\_ (run) in the 400 metres, but had to pull out at the last minute because I hurt my ankle.
- (17) Why aren't we taking a taxi – I (not carry) \_\_\_\_\_ all your shopping.
- (18) Next month she (work) \_\_\_\_\_ here for 10 years.
- (19) If the language \_\_\_\_\_ (survive) it must be taught in primary school.
- (20) It's nearly autumn. Soon the leaves (change) \_\_\_\_\_ colour.
- (21) I'm sure it (rain) \_\_\_\_\_ tomorrow.

In contrast to the assessment test, the students now did really well with an overall average of 83%. Thus it is clear that the future forms can be learnt by Swiss students given the right material and applying a suitable method. However, such a test is just an achievement test and not a diagnostic test, which only proves that the students had worked hard and memorised the tables given above (cf. Schmitt 2000: 164). Furthermore they knew that in every gap there had to be a verb form expressing the future.

### 3.3 Group C

Although they had been taught in the same way as Group B, two years later they seem to have forgotten that English uses different forms for the future or that the future has to be expressed in the verb form and not just in the adverbial.

They are of course much better than the students in Group A and do not make mistakes such as in (9). In other words, they now master the auxiliaries *may*, *might*, *must* and *can* and can produce correct sentences as in (22) and (23):

- (22) I might go to university.
- (23) If they save enough money, they can buy their own farm.

This, however, is not surprising, as they can use the same constructions as in their mother tongue, where *chöne* and *müese* express the present or the future, according to the context they are used in.

With respect to the other future forms, there is not much difference to the students of Group A. In spoken as well as written production there is still a very strong tendency to use the present simple, as we can see in the following sentences:

- (24) He fears that he gets canned.
- (25) When Crooks suggests that George doesn't come back ...
- (26) She hopes that some day there is this letter from Hollywood.

Future forms sometimes occur, especially in writing, but they are mostly limited to the will-future and the going-to-future, which are used in free variation. In spoken English the form *gonna* is sometimes used, not only to replace the going-to-future but also the will-future as in (27).

- (27) I'm sure it's gonna rain.

As with Group A, the present continuous is hardly ever used for future activities. This is even more surprising as there is a very strong tendency to overuse the continuous form in the present, as there is for all three groups, although the difference between the habitual and the progressive present can also be expressed in Swiss German, as shown in (28) and (29).

- (28) Ich lise vil. (I read a lot.)
- (29) Ich tue läse. (I'm reading.)

A possible reason might be that the present continuous is the easier form, esp. with respect to negative and interrogative sentences and is normally learnt first. However, this does not explain the preferred use of the present simple for the future.

It would have been interesting to see how well the students of Group C would have done in a similar test as the one given to Group B, but unfortunately this data is not available.

### 3.4 Summary of results

We have seen that even when the students have reached level C1, they hardly ever use future forms and if they do, only the will-future and the going-to-future occur. Furthermore, these two forms are used in free variation in oral as well as written production. However, as we have seen with Group B, this is not a result of bad teaching or learning. They are absolutely capable of acquiring the 10 different forms and using them adequately, but only in isolation. If they are told that they have to use a future form and are given enough time, so that they can work analytically, their results are really good.

If they showed a tendency to overuse the going-to-future, their production might be influenced by the French construction *aller faire*, which is the only French future form they had been taught when starting to learn English. But as this is not the case, we have to look for another explanation.

## 4. A possible explanation

A possible explanation for the fact that Swiss EFL students tend not to use future forms might be found along the lines of linguistic determinism, the first principles of the Sapir-

Whorf hypothesis, which states that language determines the way we think. Whorf stated that

[w]e dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds — and this means largely by the linguistic systems of our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way — an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language [...] all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated. (Whorf 1956: 212)

This is especially true for abstract notions such as time. Whorf argues that it would be very difficult for a Hopi, who lacks a concept of time as a dimension, and an English physicist to understand each other's thinking, given the major differences between the languages (cf. Crystal 1997: 15).

The differences between Swiss German and English are of course much smaller than the ones between Hopi and English, but they do exist. It has often been claimed that the English tense system is based on a Newtonian concept of time, in which time is considered to be the forth dimension, independent of the other three spatial dimensions. Time is a linear dimension moving uniformly from past through present to the future, a concept that is relatively easy to understand.

In Einstein's theory of relativity, however, time is not considered to be independent from space, but is closely linked to it. This is similar to Hopi, in which there are no forms corresponding to English tenses, but there are a series of forms which make it possible to talk about various durations, from the speaker's point of view (cf. Crystal 1997: 15), i.e. time is connected to space. We all know how difficult it is to understand Einstein's theory. Whether this is due to the fact that it does not adhere to our mental concept based on our mother tongue or whether it would be easier for a Hopi to grasp the theory of relativity has never been tested. First of all, Einstein's articles on the theory of relativity were originally published in German<sup>2</sup> and secondly it would probably be rather difficult to find a theoretical physicist among the Hopi.

What about Swiss German? The language only has a two-tense system, the present perfect and the present, whereas the present perfect refers to the past and the present to everything else. Or in other words, Swiss German reflects a system with only two times, the past and the non-past. Although Stephen Hawking has no connections to Swiss German, this binary time concept is in line with his picture of the universe. In the chapter on "The Arrow of Time" in *A Brief History of Time* (Hawking 1988: 151-161) he explains the difference between the past and the present and why we can remember the past but not the future, based on the distinction between the thermodynamic, the psychological and the cosmological arrow of time. His main argument is that at every point in the past the entropy (or disorder) of the universe had increased due to released energy. The two important times are thus only the past and the present.

It might well be that the mental concept of time of Swiss German speakers is a dyadic one and as they have never missed a future tense in their mother tongue they see no necessity for such a form in their L2s. This does of course not mean that they cannot talk

<sup>2</sup> Although Einstein studied in Switzerland and worked in Switzerland at the time, his mother tongue was Standard German.

about the future, as would be claimed by linguistic relativity, the second principle of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Furthermore, teachers of French and Italian to Swiss German speakers confirmed that they have noticed the same tendency among their students. Especially in spoken Italian they only use the present simple form for future events, whereas in French they might use the near future (*aller faire qc.*), but hardly ever the future tense (e.g. *j'irai*). Even in Standard German, Swiss speakers tend to use the present simple where the form with *werden* would be appropriate.

## 5. Conclusion and outlook

We have seen that Swiss German speakers show a strong tendency to use the present simple for future events throughout their career of learning English although they have no difficulty in learning the correct future form and can apply them in a respective achievement test. I have suggested that this might be due to linguistic determinism and the fact that their mental concept of time is a dyadic one.

As the same tendency has been observed with Italian, French and Standard German, we would have to carry out similar analyses for these languages. Furthermore it might be interesting to look at the different past tenses to see which is the preferred form. If it turns out to be the present perfect, we could just claim that their second language acquisition is influenced by simple L1 transfer. However, I have noticed that at least in English the preferred tense is the past simple, which would speak for linguistic determinism.

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